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AUTHOR Robertson, Thomas
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how the musical dice game can be used with beginning, intermediate, or advanced students. In the musical dice game, the student composes six separate musical compositions of five measures each. Each measure of the musical compositions is written on a separate, numbered card. The performance of each measure is determined by either (1) the roll of one die, with six possible combinations, or (2) the roll of two dice, with 11 possible combinations. After the die or dice is rolled for each measure, the corresponding card is selected. When the player finishes the task, the cards are arranged in their correct order and the performer plays the resulting piece. Some areas practicing a musical dice game can offer practical experience in: (1) sight reading; (2) melodic structure; (3) harmony; and (4) counterpoint. The document illustrates and describes how cards for the game should appear, and how to conduct the game. (LAP)

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The Musical Dice Game as a Composition Exercise

by Thomas Robertson

ABSTRACT

The musical dice game is a musical composition in which each measure is written on a card, the performance of each measure is determined by either the roll of one or two dice. After the cards are arranged in their correct order, the performer plays the resultant piece.

This form is suggested as a composition exercise for beginning, intermediate, or advanced music students. It is argued that practicing a dice game could offer valuable experience in sight-reading, that composing a dice game could offer practical experience in melody, harmony, counterpoint, that practicing a dice game could provide a gregarious experience for music students, and that performing a dice game could offer entertainment for the audience.

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The musical dice game is a musical composition in which each measure is written on a card. The performance of each measure is determined by either (1) the roll of one die, with 6 possibilities, or (2) the roll of two dice, with 11 possibilities. After the die or dice is rolled for each measure, the appropriate card is selected. When the person rolling the die or dice finishes the task, the cards are arranged in their correct order and the performer plays the resultant piece.

The musical dice game is a long-standing recreational device. There are dice games which bear the names of Kernberger, Haydn, Mozart, and Scott Joplin. (The latter two are available from Carousel Publishing Corp., Brighton, MA 02135. The second and third items are on file at the Library of Congress.)

However, one does not have to be a composer of the stature of Kernberger, Haydn, Mozart, or Scott Joplin to compose a musical dice game. Whether your student is a beginning, intermediate, or advanced student, your student can compose, and perhaps would benefit from composing, a musical dice game. This paper is to tell you why and how.

WHY

The first reason is that practicing a dice game could offer valuable experience in sight-reading. If you use the pattern suggested in this paper, there are 7,776 possibilities. (6 times 6 times 6 times 6 equals 7,776.) This makes it impossible for the student to play from rote or from memory and obligatory for the student to play from note.

The second reason is that composing a dice game could offer practical experience in melodic structure. If you follow the pattern given in this paper, your student will write melodies with first and second endings, thereby resulting in AA' melodies.

The third reason is that composing a dice game could offer practical experience in harmony. If you follow the pattern given in this paper, your student's composition will always have the same harmonic accompaniment. This will be a valuable demonstration to the student, since one variable is changed (the melody) while the other is not (the harmony).

The fourth reason is that composing a dice game could offer practical experience in counterpoint. You can make hundreds of melodies and countermelodies depending on how you arrange the cards.

If you follow the pattern given in this article, "Skip to My Lou" could also be used as a countermelody.

If you wish to illustrate imitative counterpoint, then the first set of five cards could serve as the subject for a canon while one or more sets of the remaining cards could serve as one or more countersubjects. For an example of this, take a look at a composition by fifth-grader Pam Albright:

You see that each line of this composition could be played simultaneously with the preceding or the following line. There may be a few parallel unisons or a few other broken rules, but it's still not bad for a fifth grader.

If you have two students compose dice games in the same key, then both dice games could be played as a quodlibet.

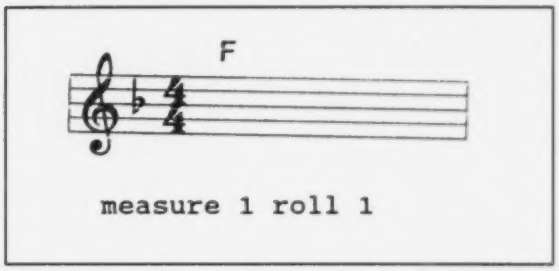
The fifth reason is that practicing a dice game could provide a gregarious experience for your students. When learning becomes fun, learning becomes valuable and significant.

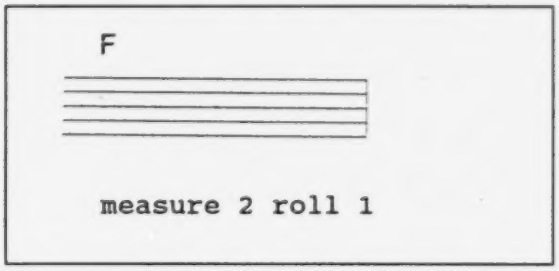
The sixth reason is that performing a dice game could offer entertainment for the audience. Audiences at student recitals

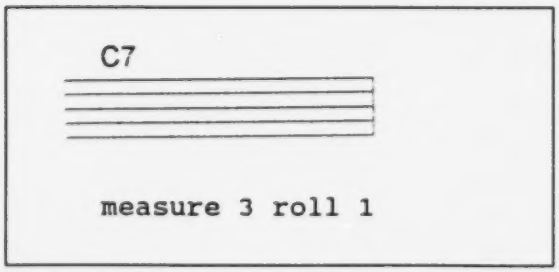
could become tired of the same humdrum routine. This could provide them with a relief.

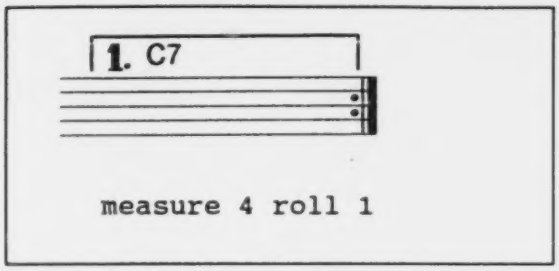
HOW

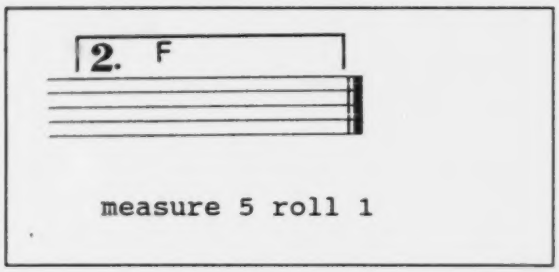
In the lesson in which you wish for the student begin work on the composition, present the student with 5 cards marked as follows:









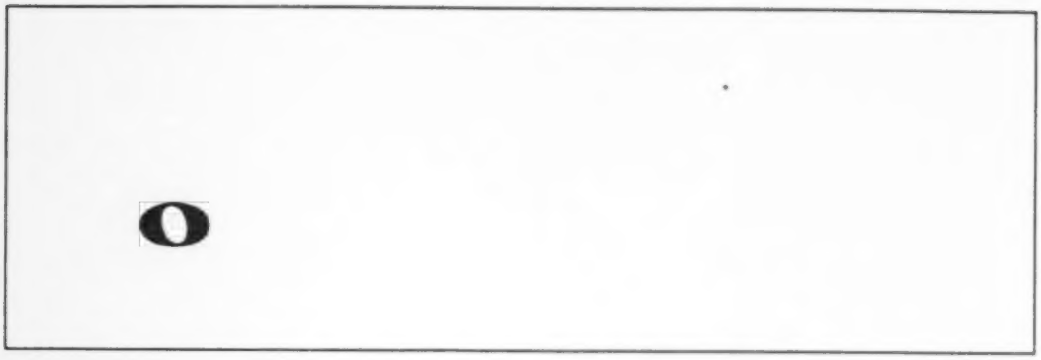


Tell the student that F, A, and/or C could be used in any measure marked F and that C, E, G, and/or bB could be used in any measure marked C7. If wish for the student's composition to be pentatonic, you can limit the C7 measures to C and/or G.

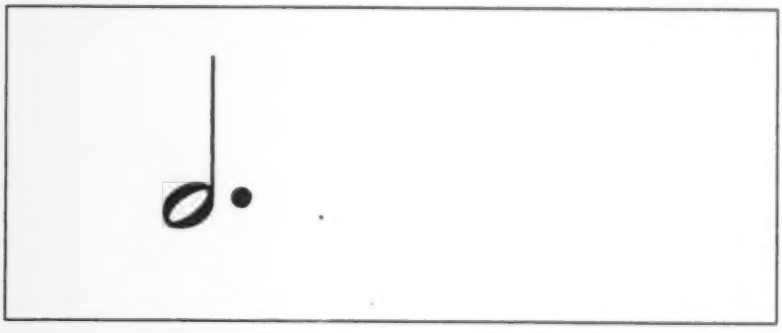
To aid the student in writing measures which are rhythmically correct, present the student with a card marked as follows:

1	2	3	4

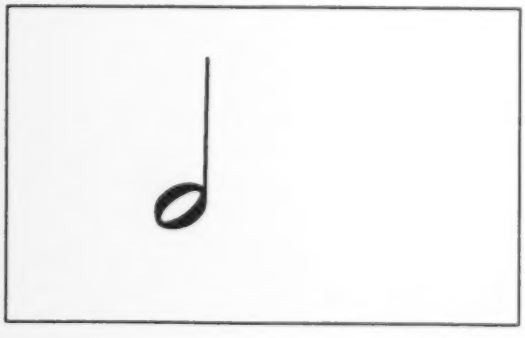
1 whole note:



1 dotted half note:



2 half notes:



4 quarter notes:

and 4 eighth-note couplets:

Tell your student that any combination of note cards which covers, and only covers, the 1-2-3-4 card will be acceptable as a 4-4 rhythm.

If you are concerned that the melody must end with a sense of finality, you could make an additional rule that measure 5 must end with an F, and that the F must be at least a half note.

In the second session, repeat the procedure, except that the student will receive 5 cards marked "measure 1 roll 2," "measure 2 roll 2," and so on. Repeat the procedure until the sixth session.

As stated at the beginning, this little chance composition could serve as a novelty in a public performance. For an audience participation student, you could announce an original composition

by Suzy Hopkins.

Suzy Hopkins then states, "I'm sorry, but I'm not quite ready. For every measure, I came up with six different possibilities and I just can't decide!"

You say, "Maybe someone could help you, Suzy. Is there anyone out there who could help us by rolling this die?" You then choose a participant from the audience, who rolls the die 5 times. After the audience member introduces himself as Bob Harrison, you say, "We will now perform an original composition by Suzy Hopkins and Bob Harrison."

The first performance takes place with Bob Harrison standing by. Suzy Hopkins expresses dissatisfaction, so the process is repeated. The process is repeated, after which Suzy Hopkins expresses satisfaction.

The composition could also be performed with a musically untrained audience member playing a bell, a monochord string instrument, or some other instrument which can play only one note. (In the key of F, this one note would be C.) After the performance, you could tell that audience member, "Join my music group and I will make you a star!"

One of the students then jumps up, holds up a star cut from construction paper, and yells, "Don't listen to him/her! Don't listen to him/her! I joined the group because he/her game me the same line! And here is the star he/she made me!"

If another student has also written a dice game, or if another student has practiced a song, such as "Skip to My Lou," which fits as a countermelody, then there is a opportunity for still another

stunt. Both student clamor for a chance to play their respective solos, so you say, "I'm sorry, there isn't time to hear them both, so you will have to play them both at the same time."

Both students say, "Awwwwww!"

Throughout this paper, a critical reader might be asking, "What if my student doesn't aspire to be a great composer?" The skill could come in handy anyway. A recreational leader with composing skills could make up a song for any occasion. Any classroom teacher with composing skills, not necessarily a music teacher, could make up a song for any subject matter.

Until the Eighteenth Century, the skill of musical composition was not restricted to a privileged few. Any person who was designated as a "musician" was considered to be a music teacher, a performer, and a composer. We know very little about how music was taught at that time, but we can guess that music theory and music composition were taught in conjunction with music performance. That might be a good custom to bring back.